



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: May 28, 2020

Agenda Item: Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement, Region 2

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background:

FWP seeks endorsement on the proposed Sweathouse Creek conservation easement (CE) on the Hackett Ranch in Ravalli County. The ranch consists of 540 contiguous acres adjacent to the Bitterroot National Forest (BNF) in HD 240, west of Victor in the west-side foothills of the Bitterroot Valley (see map). These foothills serve as deer and elk winter range, but also have high development value. Similar habitats in the valley have experienced a boom in housing development over the past two to three decades that has constricted wildlife habitat, particularly winter range for deer and elk. Around 1,000 elk are surveyed in HD 240 annually, and game damage during the winter is a chronic issue among agricultural producers in the area.

Serving as a transitional habitat between the high mountains and the valley bottom, the Hackett Ranch offers one of the few opportunities in the Bitterroot Valley for spring turkey hunting and is also popular among elk and deer hunters in the fall. The Hacketts have been enrolled in FWP's Block Management Program for 24 years.

The private property also contains the parking area for the highly popular trail leading to Sweathouse Falls on BNF land. The Hackett family has provided public access at this trailhead year-round via an unofficial agreement with the BNF, but no official easement exists to maintain this critical access route. BNF is working with the landowner on securing a trailhead access to the National Forest. With commission endorsement, FWP would work to secure a habitat CE for the ranch that would also ensure ongoing public access for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation.

Public Involvement Process & Results:

FWP has not yet sought public comment on the proposed CE. Upon endorsement from the commission, FWP would conduct further negotiations with the landowners and complete appropriate analysis and public review processes to determine project feasibility. FWP would work alongside the BNF as the BNF also conducts its own agency processes, with the goal that both the National Forest access and the FWP CE would move forward simultaneously.

Alternatives and Analysis:

Proposal alternatives and analysis would be developed by FWP (upon endorsement by the commission) and released in a draft EA for 30-day public review/comment opportunity.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the commission endorse this proposal, allowing the department to pursue and evaluate it and to offer opportunities for public review and comment.

Proposed Motion:

I move the commission endorse the proposed Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement, allowing FWP to conduct further analysis and associated public review.